



River Guide 2: Fort Niobrara NWR to Berry Bridge

River Mile: 4.8 to 12.4

Stream Gradient: 6.6 feet/mile

Cornell Bridge is the start (Reference Mile 0) of the most popular floating section of Niobrara National Scenic River. Refer to the Niobrara National Scenic River brochure and map to locate the sites below.

Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Canoe Launch

The Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge Canoe Launch is a popular access point for boaters using the Niobrara River. Facilities include a parking lot, restrooms, interpretive exhibits, and six access ramps. In 2007 nearly 9,000 canoers, kayakers, and tubers floated the river from this launch site. Summer weekends are busy. Possessing

alcoholic beverages, water guns, and playing loud music are prohibited on the river within the refuge. The Niobrara flows through a federally designated wilderness area for about 5 miles to the eastern boundary of the refuge. A daily user fee is charged and private floaters must display their permit.

Cornell Bridge to Fort Falls Rapids



Fort Falls Rapids

Immediately downstream from the launch site boaters will pass under the Cornell Bridge. Just ahead the river gains speed and several large underwater boulders create small haystacks in mid-channel. A large rock shelf with shallow water is on the right, and Fort Falls Rapids (Class 1) offers fun whitewater through a deep chute on the left. Novice boaters may have difficulty in this section. To view Fort Falls or walk the nature trail (0.9 mile loop), take out on river right just before the chute.



Fort Falls

Fort Niobrara Wilderness Area



Fort Niobrara Wilderness

Ahead the river continues through the Fort Niobrara Wilderness Area. Quiet boaters might see bison, elk, coyote, white-tailed and mule deer, mink, beaver, great-blue herons, belted kingfishers, spotted sandpipers, red-tailed hawks, Canada geese, mallards and wood ducks. Spiny soft-shell, painted, and snapping turtles often lounge at water's edge on south-facing

banks to soak up much needed sunshine in order to regulate their body temperature.

Bison and elk are kept within high fences on either side of the river and are descendants of a herd of six buffalo and seventeen elk donated to the refuge in 1912. Free-ranging elk also occur throughout the river valley.



Winter Ice-cliffs

Passing beneath the Buffalo Bridge, boaters can access the 4,635-acre wilderness area on river left, and explore its rugged hills, canyons, pine forests and prairies. Hikers are asked to sign in at a register box. Down-river loom towering sandstone bluffs of the Rosebud and Valentine formations. Year-round seeps keep the rock wet. Spectacular ice bluffs form on the cliffs in winter. The rock is crumbly and weak, and unsuitable for climbing.

On river right grow white-barked Paper Birch, a tree normally found in the North Country. These trees grow on cool north-facing slopes that are shady and moist, providing the right ecological conditions for their survival. Many of these slopes

are saturated with groundwater that flows from Sandhill aquifers and drains into the river valley as seeps, springs, and tributaries.

Along the way are scenic vistas of ponderosa pine-clad bluffs, small waterfalls pouring over precipices, clear, spring-fed creeks, and tall cliffs. In winter, bald eagles frequent this stretch of the river and rafts of common merganser and common goldeneye float its icy waters. Eventually a large bluff with a deep recess comes into view. A rock slide occurred here in January of 2005 and narrowed the river by about 20 feet. A half-mile further on a high bluff on river right with a bison fence perched on its edge marks the refuge's eastern boundary.

Fort Niobrara Wilderness Area to Berry Bridge



Berry Bridge

Private lands border the river downstream from the refuge. Crooked Creek enters on river left, and three islands are soon encountered. With adequate flows the islands can be paddled on either side, but when the river gets below 500 CFS you may want to stay left of the islands to avoid bottoming out. One more mile of floating brings Berry Bridge into view. The original bridge was about a mile west of its present site at Sears Ford and was built of wood. The Berry State Aid Bridge was built in 1920-21.

In 1881 Harper Cleveland, a wrangler who brought cattle to Cherry County from Texas, married Emma Berry and settled in

this area. In 1883 they sold the place to Emma's mother, Susan J. Berry. She settled here seeking the protection Fort Niobrara offered and because of a good water supply. The bridge and hill are named after Susan's homestead. A gristmill was also once located in this area.

Berry Bridge Resort is on river left. Toilets are available here for public use. Across the river is Berry Falls, a delightfully refreshing place to hang out on hot summer days. A river gauge is located across from the falls and river levels and stream flow can be accessed online at the USGS site <http://water.usgs.gov>. Look under Nebraska to find the Sparks river gauge in Cherry County.